

William Petrie Graduate Student Library Scholarship 2020
Runner-up: Janice Niemann, Faculty of Humanities, Department of English
Runner-up Essay

Distant Reading Garden Novels in UVic Library Databases

My doctoral dissertation explores how nineteenth-century British novelists used certain garden spaces—such as summer-houses, shrubberies, and lime-walks—to signal that characters commit social transgressions. A significant part of my argument is that this trope of garden transgressions extends across genres in the nineteenth century and, importantly, through both canonical and noncanonical novels.

With tens of thousands of nineteenth-century British novels to choose from, I struggled to identify books that had significant garden scenes. At that point, I turned to a research method known as *distant reading* (see Moretti). Distant reading, often defined in comparison to close reading, involves scanning digitized texts in order to search for data patterns, with one of the main benefits being that you are able to “read” more texts than any one human could physically read on their own. Fortunately, the corpus with which I work is out of copyright, so many of the novels are digitized on sites like Google Books or Project Gutenberg. However, because I am interested in obscure as well as well-known novels, often these popular sites did not have all the texts I needed. Here is where the library proved invaluable to my research.

Having access to specialized databases of digitized texts, notably *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*, *Nineteenth-Century Collections Online*, the *Biodiversity Heritage Library*, and Gale’s *Archives of Sexuality and Gender: Sex and Sexuality, Sixteenth to Twentieth Century*, gave me the opportunity to build my own database of garden texts based on how many times each of my specific garden spaces occurs in each novel.

I used a simple control+find search method to count the number of occurrences of each garden space in the texts I was searching, and then I entered all of that data into an Excel spreadsheet before graphing the data to present at conferences and in my dissertation (see Appendix A). Not only did our library resources enable me to conduct innovative quantitative research (a rarity in the Humanities), but they also introduced me to texts that I might never have otherwise encountered. In the British Library’s Private Case Collection (accessed via the *Archives of Sexuality and Gender*), for example, I discovered that summer-houses occur frequently in nineteenth-century pornography, which led to me write an entire section of my dissertation on “Sex in the Summer-House,” a section that I am currently expanding into an article to submit to *Victorian Literature and Culture*. Before beginning my distant reading research in our library’s databases, I had no experience with nineteenth-century novels like *The Romance of Lust* (1873) or *Venus in India* (1889), but now they inform a significant aspect of my argument: even in the most transgressive novels, summer-houses still facilitate next-level deviance for characters, strengthening my overall claim that trope of garden transgressions functions across genres.

Our library’s databases allowed me to conduct original research that ultimately changed the shape of my dissertation for the better.

Works Cited

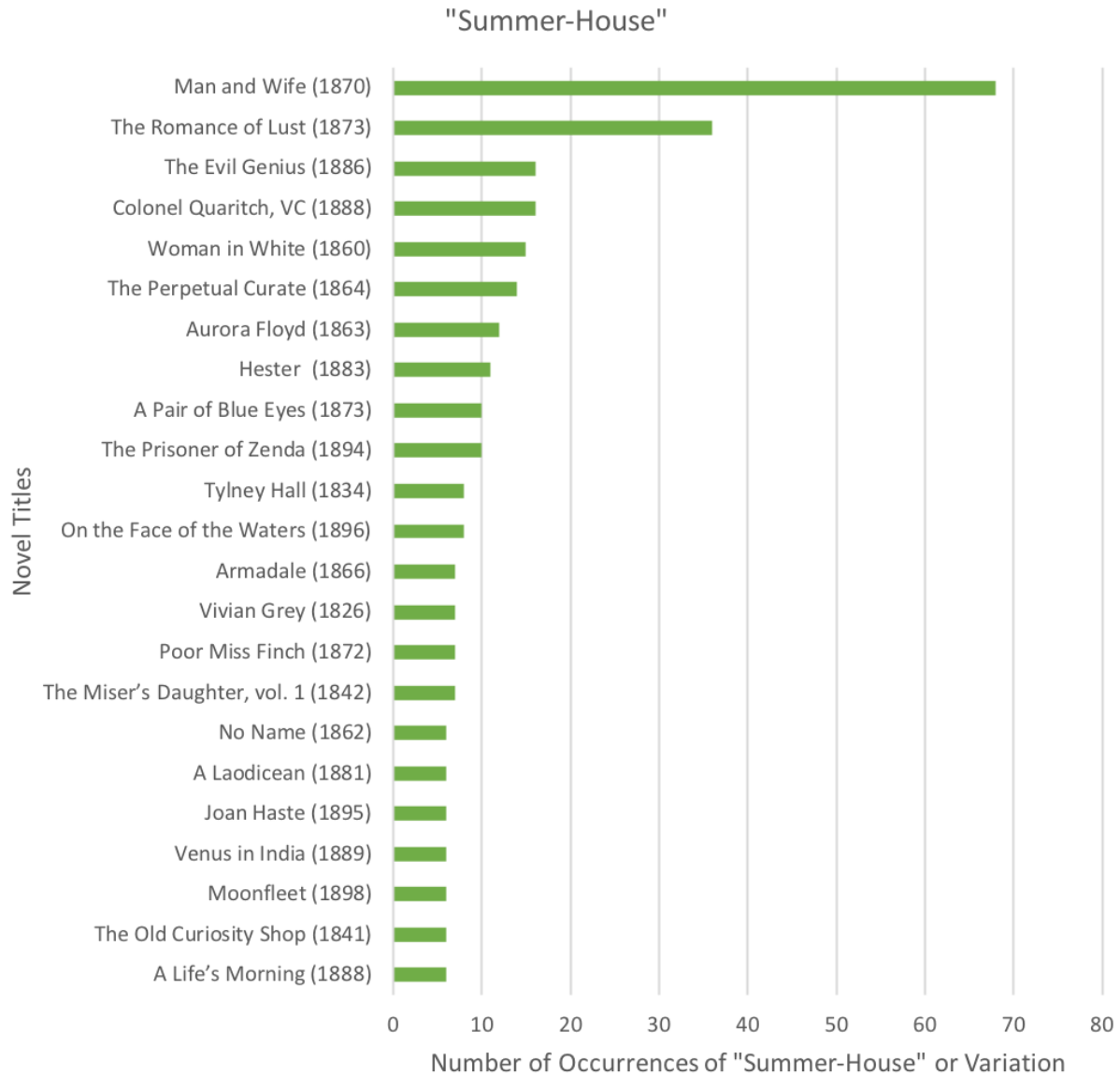
Devereaux, Charles. *Venus in India*. 1889.

Lazenby, William. *The Romance of Lust; or Early Experiences*. 1873.

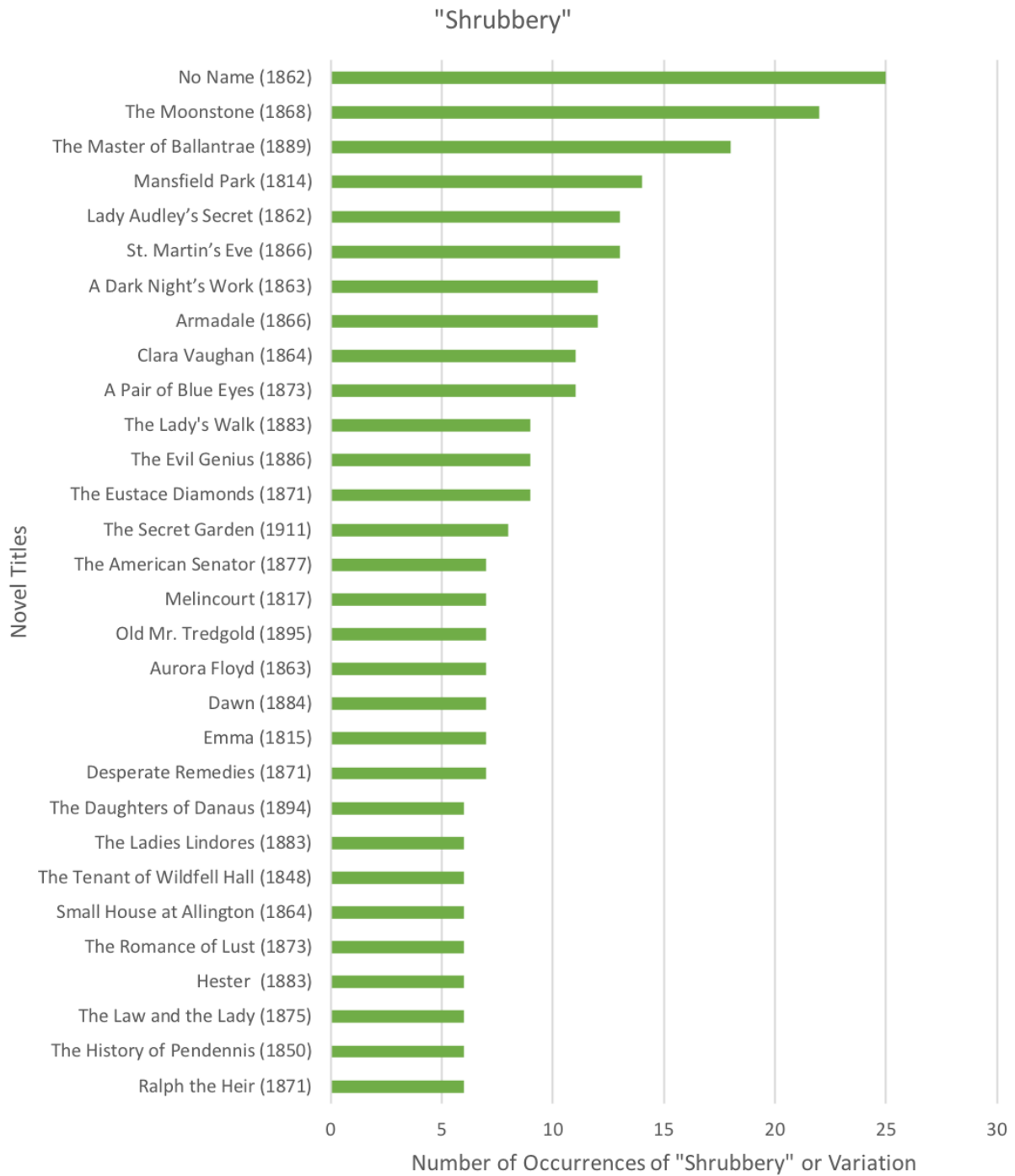
Moretti, Franco. *Distant Reading*. Verso, 2013.

Appendix A: Garden Data

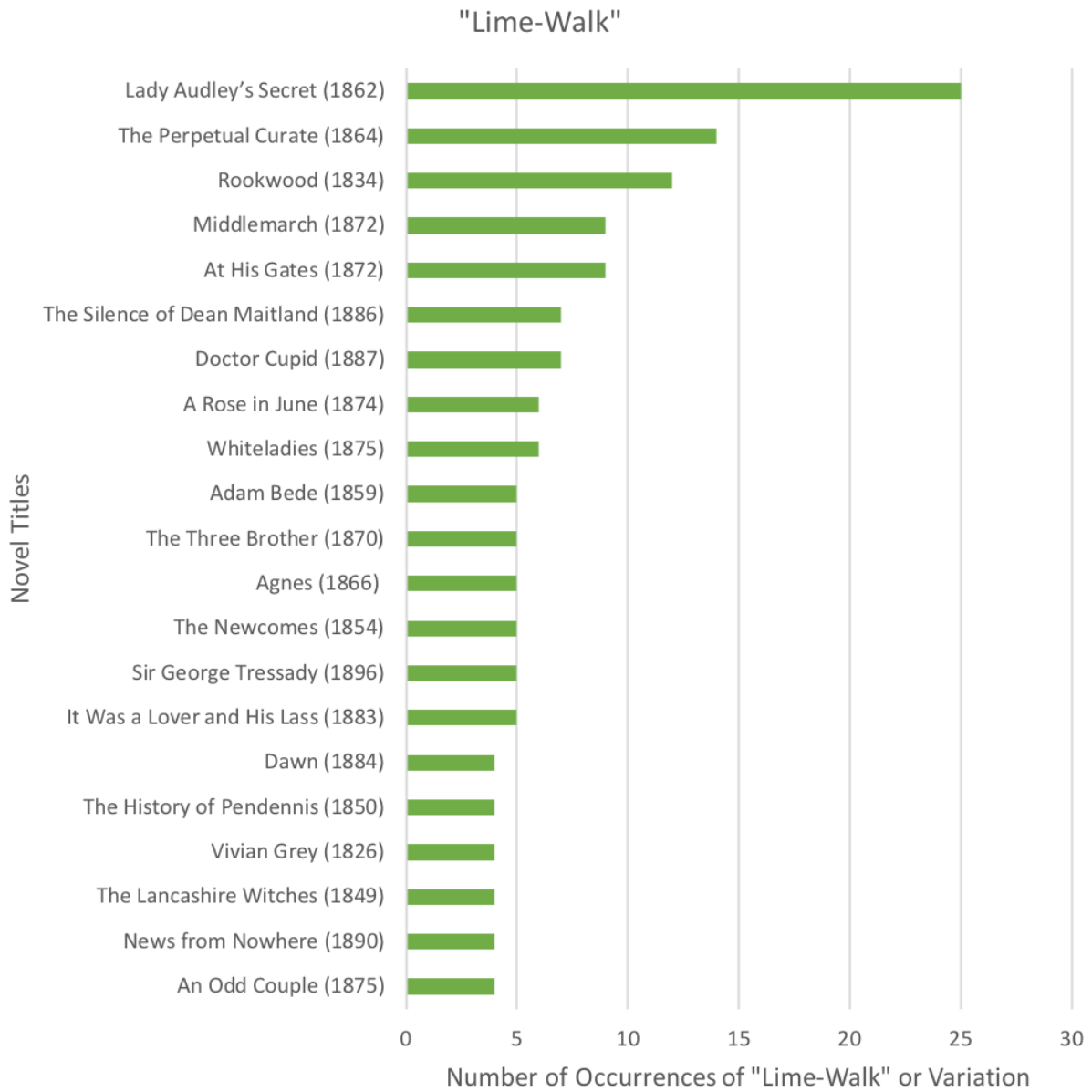
Appendix A.1: Total occurrences of “summer-house” in nineteenth-century novels



Appendix A.2: Total occurrences of “shrubby” in nineteenth-century novels



Appendix A.3: Total occurrences of “lime-walk” in nineteenth-century novels



Appendix A.4: Overall total of occurrences of garden terms in nineteenth-century novels

